

¹⁶He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. As was his custom, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. ¹⁷The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
¹⁹and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

²⁰He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹He began to tell them, "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

²²They all spoke well of him and were impressed by the words of grace that came from his mouth. And they kept saying, "Isn't this Joseph's son?"

²³He told them, "Certainly you will quote this proverb to me, 'Physician, heal yourself!' Do here in your hometown everything we heard you did in Capernaum." ²⁴And he said, "Amen I tell you: No prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵But truly I tell you: There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut for three years and six months, while a great famine came over all the land. ²⁶Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow of Zarephath, in Sidon. ²⁷And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was healed except Naaman the Syrian."

²⁸All those who were in the synagogue were filled with rage when they heard these things. ²⁹They got up and drove him out of the town. They led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the middle of them and went on his way.

What do you expect when you come to worship on Sundays? I don't think it's worth pretending that we don't evaluate what we've seen and heard. All of us do it. Maybe on the car ride home, you say to your family, "I really liked the hymns we sang today," or, maybe more often, "Why did Pastor pick so many new songs this Sunday?" We listen to the sermon and decide whether the pastor did a good job or not based on how well he held our attention, and maybe how long he went on for before finally saying "amen."

This is often how things go. As humans with the God-given gift to analyze the world around us, we naturally are going to differentiate between what is good and bad or what is better or worse. And there's nothing wrong with analyzing what we do in worship and asking if it's doing the best job serving God's purposes for worship. But more than the trapping of worship, more than the instruments played or the way the pastor dresses or even the art and music used, there are certain things that we should expect in worship, certain elements that are non-negotiables.

You file into church one Sunday morning. You know that your pastor is out of town, and you've heard only a little about the guy filling in this week. You've heard that he's done some pretty amazing stuff in the congregations he's been to before yours.

The service starts with the ringing of the bell and out steps a man who looks familiar. You can't place where you've seen him before. The service progresses with a hymn or two, then when it's time for God's word to be read, the guest pastor walks up to the lectern. He reads this section from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the

captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." You know these words and you love these words of comfort from God to his people.

Then the pastor walks from the lectern to the pulpit. The eyes of everyone in the room are locked on him. Even the little babies have stopped their fussing for the moment. From his lips comes the sermon introduction: "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." There's a rumbling in the room. What great news that one of the promises of God is fulfilled right in front of you this morning! You continue to listen as he speaks with such power and authority. But the excitement quickly changes to confusion as people think about it: "Wait a second. Did he just claim to be the Messiah?" And the confusion changes to anger: "Hey, I think I know that guy. Yeah. He grew up around here. I went to school with him."

All excitement is now out of the room. Everybody's frustrated. It would be great to see God fulfilling his promises right in front of your eyes, but what this preacher is telling you sounds a lot like blasphemy. You don't see a Savior from God. You see a plain-looking man, a man who is becoming more and more unpopular by the minute.

Then he digs himself a deeper hole with the congregation: "Certainly you will quote this proverb to me, 'Physician, heal yourself!' Do here in your hometown everything we heard you did in Capernaum." Now it feels like he's attacking you. After delivering such beautiful words of grace from Isaiah and promising that the freedom Isaiah spoke about was yours right now, his words are not full of honey. They are full of warnings. They are full of accusations. But he continues: "Amen I tell you: No prophet is accepted in his hometown." He then insinuates that salvation is for all people, not just the ethnic house of Israel.

People in the congregation begin to stand up. They grab hold of the guest preacher. They will not be shaking his hand in the back of church and thanking him for the message today. Instead, they plan to send him on a trip instead. You join the crowd, grabbing this heretic and escorting him out of church, out of the town square, to the cliff that marks the end of the city. And as you prepare to toss this heretic from the brow of the hill to his death, he walks away. You can't grab him. You can't push him back. He just simply leaves.

What did the people expect in worship in the synagogue that day when Jesus stood up to read? They expected what they were used to. They expected him to read from the scriptures then go on about how they were doing a good job working to keep God's commands and strengthen their relationship with God. In short, they wanted to hear about salvation by obedience to the law. But as you know, that's not what Jesus was there to preach.

Jesus begins with the gospel. He begins by reporting to them what he's there to do. He's there to preach good news to people who are used to lots of bad news. The good news Jesus brings is freedom, freedom not to a people enslaved by the Roman Empire, but a people enslaved by sin and their own inability to master it. He would give sight to the blind, not just literally, like he does on some occasions, but to open the eyes of those sitting in the darkness of the law by shining the light of the gospel on them, sins forgiven in the Savior. It's time for freedom. It's time for the Lord's favor. Of course, Jesus reads this passage from Isaiah because he's the bringer of forgiveness.

But the people are confused. They've hardened their hearts with the belief that they have the power in them to become what God expects of them. This is why we see the crowd turn on him. Jesus is offering peace and freedom through himself, but the people have spent a lifetime chasing it by their own hands and mouths. Add to that the fact that Jesus is one of them. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all capture this scene in their Gospels, and it's helpful to read the other accounts because they help us understand what their question about Joseph means. They know Joseph from way back. They know Jesus' brothers and sisters. His family is from the community.

And then the eldest son of the carpenter stands up and claims to be God's Messiah promised for thousands of years? You can understand their skepticism about both the messenger and the message.

So, Jesus moves from speaking gospel to them and turns to law preaching. If they think the notion of a Savior from sin, working apart from them, is foolish, Jesus will show them just how foolish their current line of thinking is. They're rejecting the Savior. They're rejecting God's love and mercy in favor of a god who will bring out the scales and see how well their lives weigh out.

The great guest preacher's sermon rocks the boat because their boat needs to be rocked. They do not see themselves as a people that needs salvation from sin. They see themselves as a people that needs salvation from bad government or salvation from sickness and poverty, but not from Satan.

Here we sit in worship this morning too. What are our expectations? Maybe we have some expectations about how the service is going to go. Maybe we have expectations about how the pastor will dress or how the church will be decorated. But these things don't matter. What matters is the message. What matters is what we are focusing on.

I'm sure you've sermons that are all fire and brimstone. Maybe you grew up hearing these sermons, and you walked out of church every Sunday feeling inadequate. Now, there is nothing wrong with preaching the law, the bad news about sin. In fact, the law ought to be preached. It ought to knock us down from our high perches by showing us that we are chief among sinners. But if we are left in the dust of sorrow and guilt, then we're missing the point of Isaiah 61 just as much as those in the Nazarene synagogue.

I'm sure you've also heard sermons that you'd categorize as "feel-good" sermons. You were told that you are a good person, that you have a sincere heart or are wonderful just for trying to be a good person. Jesus might not be mentioned often, because ultimately the focus is on you and what you do. That sermon is all gospel but no law, and without the law to show us how much we need Jesus, we see little need for a Savior from sin and the gospel is a moot point. We then look to Jesus to rescue us only from political frustration, economic struggles, and health setbacks. Just like the crowd before Jesus today, we don't want to talk about our own sins because a message like that forces us to admit that we are spiritual failures who need help.

So, what should we expect the focus of worship to be? What should we expect to be shown when we come to church? We should expect to be shown the bad news of our sins and the good news of our Savior Jesus. We want to be welcomed into this spiritual hospital as sin-sick patients who are shown the test results and come to accept that the cancer of sin lives in us. But we also want to leave completely healed by the radiating message of Jesus' perfect and complete sacrifice for us.

As you ride home from church Sunday after Sunday and debrief with the family about the worship service you just participated in, there's nothing wrong with critiquing the hymn choices or discussing how much the pastor could have shortened up his sermon. But remember that these things are not what makes worship. The songs we sing and the words we speak and hear in this place are meant to serve God's real purpose in worship: to show sin and Savior. Amen.